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Gideon Bachmann; Andrzej Wajda

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Man of Heart: Andrzej Wajda

Man has rights as long as he knows how to preserve them.
—Delacroix in prison

The artist and intellectual most closely associated in the world's mind with modern Poland is the film director Andrzej Wajda (born 1926), whose films have since 1954 chronicled the growth of free ideas in his native land—not always with help from its authorities, not always with success, and not always with joy. But *Generation*, *Kanal*, *Ashes and Diamonds*, *The Promised Land*, *Without Anaesthesia* and *The Conductor*, among his 28 films, have become world classics, and his last two, *Man of Marble* and *Man of Iron*, showing the rise of Solidarity and, in a way, the beginning of its demise, have made Wajda's name a household word everywhere.

At the moment of writing, Wajda has come away from Poland to make his first film since the imposition of martial law in December of 1981. He is in Paris shooting *The Danton Affair*, the story of the eight days of the trial and execution of Danton during the French

Revolution. Though based on a play he had previously directed in a theater in Warsaw, the topic cannot fail but ring contemporary echoes. The press has reported, however, that in order to be allowed out of Poland to make this film, Wajda had to promise to give no interviews on the Polish situation. In actual fact, he has preferred to keep a low profile.

Exceptionally, he agreed to speak at some length to Gideon Bachmann, American film critic and film maker, who first went to see him in Warsaw in 1961, and has maintained friendly contacts with him ever since. The following are excerpts from their conversations, held in Paris on May 3rd, 4th and 5th of this year.

From the script:

"We cannot win this trial. It's part of a political process. And politics follows its own mechanics, which has nothing to do with justice." —Philippaux, speaking to Desmoulins, in the cell at The Luxembourg, two days before the guillotine.

"Haven't you understood that we had to allow ourselves to be imprisoned? In order to open the eyes of the people! To show them what the Comités are capable of! Now they have seen, and understood."

—Danton, before the transfer to The Conciergerie.

BACHMANN: *Why shoot Danton, the story of the bureaucratization of a revolution, in 1982?*

WAJDA: This is not a new idea of mine. But in all the years that I have been thinking of realizing it, I was aware that it couldn't be a Polish film. Until now, to make it in Poland would have been an idea that engendered suspicion. In any case, an internationally produced film has more of a chance to be seen worldwide.

What does Danton mean to you, today?

It is a strong, violent, dramatic story, based on forceful characters who helped change his-



© 1982 by Gideon Bachmann. All photos by Gideon Bachmann.

tory. And ever since I saw Depardieu for the first time, I knew that one day I had to find a role for him. *The Danton Affair* was a play by the Polish playwright Stanisława Przybyszewska which I directed in Warsaw six years ago, and it seemed to me the time had come to make the film now, and with Depardieu.

You came to France with more than 20 actors and technicians . . .

I found I couldn't do without my Polish actors, with whom I had worked for many years and who constitute my "group." What I have done is try to integrate them while at the same time allowing them to retain their uniqueness: all the "Robespierristes" in the film are Polish, including Wojciech Pszoniak, who plays Robespierre himself, and all the "Dantonistes" are French actors, led by Depardieu. Each group speaks its own language, although of course the film will be dubbed for release in uniform languages.

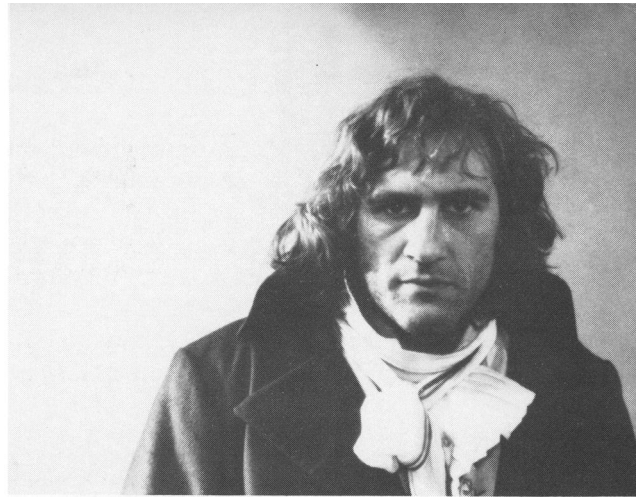
Does this not make for difficulties in shooting?

Actually the contrary occurs. Usually, when actors on a film set speak different languages, they begin, after a while, to act slower and slower, as if comprehension lagged. You can tell that they need to reflect more, that they don't have the necessary immediate reactions. This transmits itself to the viewer: he can no longer feel the full energy of the actor, to share his full pleasure.

In our case, however, the division isn't purely mechanical: the different languages have a differing ideological content. The Poles have in them a violence; they understand the politics of the story, of this French Revolution which by historical necessity advanced towards the use of terror as an instrument. They understand this necessity, this fate of revolutions symbolized by what happened at the trial of Danton. This, in fact, is the real subject of my film: that while the revolution more or less knowingly advances towards terror, the leaders are aware that terror is a mortal danger.

Why do you feel that it is especially Poles, and especially those of today, who can feel this so strongly?

For us, today, the French Revolution is the source from which spring all inquietudes, all man's attempts to change his fate, all his refusals to accept that which is and his strife to want more. We Poles, in this sense, today



Gerard Depardieu as Danton

feel like children of the French Revolution.

Does this apply less to the group of French actors?

No, but it is the collision that counts. The French actors around Danton have their own world, and what I am interested in is the conflict of concepts. The French Revolution, after all, isn't really finished. Its spirit lives, but with different intensity in different places and times. I find it only natural that men should revolt and that they should continue to believe that the course of history can be changed by their actions.

Is violence always a necessary evil in a time of change?

Perhaps not, but it is one of the major subjects in *Danton*. Yet I do not feel that the question of violence can be a determining factor in itself. What counts is what is determined by its use, and the limits set for it through consciousness, if any. In any political process there is the need for the elimination of the adversary, but where does this normally lead? Just before my film begins (and I am only dealing with the last eight days of Danton) Robespierre has eliminated the "left wing," Hébert and the "Hébertistes," and now he finds he must eliminate the "right wing" in order to be able to pursue his "centrist" line. It would be wrong to accept that Robespierre is on the left, since he only moves left in relation to Danton, in the Dantonist spirit. No, he is the typical representative of the center, and as such he commits the fundamental error: he risks everything, realizes everything, but too late realizes that in doing so he oversteps limits to which he cannot return.

You are not saying that “within limits” violence is essential?

Certainly not. But for the understanding of the period with which we are dealing, and especially the Danton affair, the definition of the concept of violence is essential. Let's say, first, that if we count the victims of the Revolution in thousands, those of the Reaction must be counted in tens of thousands. But is this a moral criterion? Is the question of “how many” are killed of importance? Or is it a question of psychology?

This is an element which I want to bring out in the film: the discussion between Robespierre and Danton, between two differing forms of reasoning for revolution, must be not only a political discussion but a psychological one. Without the psychology, nothing can be understood. As you cannot make a political film by thinking only of political elements.

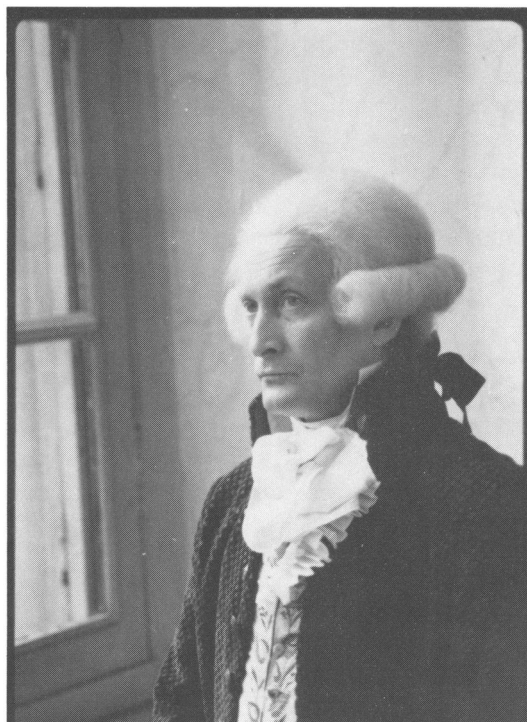
It is useless to try and understand historical personages without trying to understand their feelings. Only in this way can we approach the answer to the question: how is it that these two men, these two leaders of the Revolution, who understood better than anyone the aims of the Revolution, could not find conciliation, could find no common language in order to save the Revolution from this extreme danger, from the “solution” called violence? You have to ask yourself: who were these men?

In this sense, the question becomes universal: what passes between, or among, men, so that they can no longer trust each other? Why does one—in this case Robespierre—always, and with all force, need to destroy his adversary? Why cannot the Revolution succeed as long as Danton is alive? Isn't it possible that conciliation is only one other form of “solution”?

Is this a suggestion made in the film?

Not in this way. But if you attentively watch these two characters played by Depardieu and Pszoniak, their appearance, their behavior, their meeting on screen, the electric spark that passes between them, you receive a psychological image of considerable complexity that goes beyond linear explanations such as you suggest. In any case, there is no such thing as an explanation, and even then it's a historian's job to try.

I do not want to be caught classifying, relating and explaining history, but wish to



Wojciech Pszoniak as Robespierre

make an emotional statement, showing that the French Revolution, too, passed through a stage where every “solution” could damage it. I think, by the way, that every revolution reaches this stage sooner or later, the stage where one feels one is up against a wall, fighting historical necessities. I am particularly anxious to show, in my film, that revolutions do get to this stage, that emotions contribute as much as political reasoning to that which eventually becomes history.

Do you find the last eight days in Danton's life especially expressive of this inevitable impasse?

This was the first political trial in history, and like all trials it presents a natural dramaturgy. The natural drama concentrates the content; there is a clarity. I personally feel close to it because I think I am a person who identifies strongly with men seeking greater justice, justice not subject to political pressure. I am not neutral in my films, I defend the weak, in the tradition, one might say, of Polish Romantic art of the 19th century. This trial was the archetype of all political trials and it simply means a great deal to me.

Then you want to express more about revolutions than the fact that they reach an impasse?

Look, the French Revolution is the beginning of everything. She is the mother of all revolutionary ideas. For example: everybody has studied it; that's important. In so short a time, with such incredible concentration, a condensation of hopes was created that expressed and expresses all the dreams of mankind, all the situations that continue to repeat themselves for hundreds of years. It is a phenomenal source of inspiration and information.

With all the negative phenomena it engendered?

Yes. The French Revolution found itself confronted by a dilemma: to fight in the name of the majority meant to subdue a minority. That was Robespierre's hope and impasse: he hoped that this Revolution, by maintaining and perpetuating itself, would cause the masses to become autonomous, conscious and politically mature. That it would help the

masses, as it were, to jump a stage, the stage of the bourgeois class. But the French Revolution in the end represents the victory of the bourgeoisie, which managed to get itself established later thanks to the Revolution.

Sometimes, studying the French Revolution, one gets the impression that there was a chance there for it to go further, but this further stage in reality was impossible since no workers' class existed, which, in orthodox Marxist interpretation, is essential for revolution. This class, or *a* class, with the necessary consciousness, was lacking, and thus the Revolution could go no further.

But the French Revolution, like all popular movements, created a situation of no return, and that is what's important. That early freshness of spirit, that virginity of events. Those are the things I care for and those are the things I want to show.

DANIEL A. GREENBERG

The Reference Shelf Shuffle

Reference works provide basic introductions to every area of human inquiry. Moreover, their information structures the conceptual framework whereby understanding and appreciation develop. Unfortunately, the reference shelf presently available for the study of motion pictures is in sad disarray. For the most part, it offers widespread and persistent error, confusion, and contradiction. The time has come for a sober reassessment: an analysis of numerous failures, the recognition of a few achievements, and discussion of a program for better performance in the future.

The pervasive bad effects of slipshod encyclopedia articles and single-volume film reference works have spread throughout the film world because normal standards of scholarly evidence have been and still are poorly observed. Inadequate critical review of these materials has allowed their acceptance. Our present reference sources began to evolve in the 1920's, when standards of historical research and reporting on popular entertainment were even more lax than today. Manu-

factured history proliferated, often distributed for commercial ends. What Gordon Hendricks later exposed as "the Edison motion picture myth" led the way, highlighted by admirers' extravagant claims, and Edison's own modest ones as well. Innumerable books and articles enshrined Edison's position as sole inventor of the motion picture. But as the twenties wore on, encyclopedias and general reference works began to define, describe, and evaluate the motion picture more extensively. Those early treatments, and their descendants, even now populate home libraries and public reference shelves—their errors and contradictions still spreading misunderstandings, particularly about the history of the motion picture art.

For twentieth-century America, the prime encyclopedia has been *Britannica*, which first published an article entitled "Motion Pictures History" in 1926. In its 1910 and 1922 editions, the subject was dealt with under the heading "Cinematograph," an early term derived from the Lumière brothers' name for